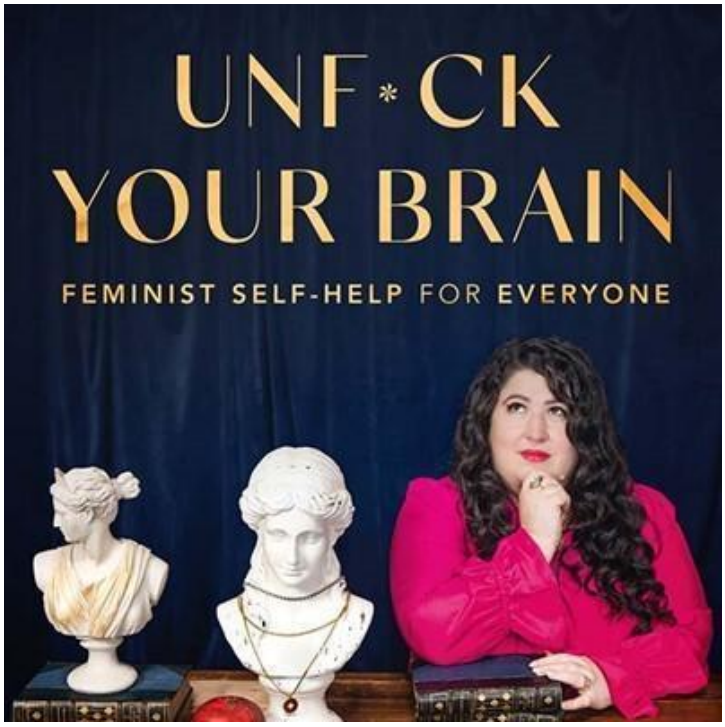
UFYB 544: Thanks, Brain! When Your Brain Is Convinced You're Right



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Kara: I'm Kara Loewentheil.

Rachel: And I'm Rachel Hart. We're master certified coaches and best friends.

Kara: And this is Thanks, Brain, a podcast about the mess in your head and how two real women try and sometimes fail to clean up their own.

Okay, Rachel, this is our first episode. What are we doing?

Rachel: Yeah, what are we doing here? It's our first episode, but what we are going to be talking about here is basically what I think happens over text message with each other all day long for the last...

Kara: This is like being in our DMs and our voice memos.

Rachel: Yeah, being in our DMs for the last 10 years, which is a lot of, oh my God, I need coaching. What is wrong with my brain?

Kara: And the answer is always, "Well, your thoughts. Your thoughts are what's wrong with your brain." I think we both feel like life gives you so many opportunities for coaching. Like before this started, we were just talking about your kids are sick and like the 14 things you had to self-coach on this morning, having sick kids, running a business, all of that.

So a lot of the coaching field and industry is so like, you know, aspire to be me. I am perfect. I've never yelled at my children or had a bad hair day because I know how to coach myself. And if you pay me, you will be perfect too. And I feel like you and I are very resolutely like, no, this is called the

human experience, and it is a mess up in everybody's brain. And yes, we have some tools and skills that help us manage our minds better than many people, but it's actually I think more helpful to hear the reality of what it's like to manage your mind than to just pretend that if you learn this three-step process, you'll never have a negative thought again.

Rachel: Yeah, that has not been my experience of it.

Kara: No, me neither.

Rachel: That I've erased all negative thoughts from my brain and it, like, everything's just rainbows and unicorns ever since I became a coach.

Kara: Just sunshine in there. So our idea for this podcast is that we will take turns. So every week one of us will talk through some self-coaching we had to do recently. We will make each other laugh and cry like we normally do. Everybody will learn a lot. But then at the end, we're going to have the other person actually give a positive, helpful thing their brain did. So that's kind of why we've called it Thanks, Brain. A lot of the time, that's what we text each other when our brain is like, "Hey, did you know that actually you're a loser that everyone hates and here's all this evidence that I've compiled for you while you were sleeping?" And then we're like, "Thanks, brain."

But there is hope. When you learn how to coach yourself, your brain does learn to coach itself. And so your brain also will offer you helpful thoughts and we don't want to be unfair to the brain. It is also helpful sometimes. So we're going to try to share both of those.

Rachel: And that is like the most magical thing. It still astounds me every time. I'm not even working for a new thought and I feel like my brain just gives me one on a platter that is actually useful. I'm like, oh, you can train your brain. This is a real thing.

Kara: Right. You're like, "Oh, you do know how to come up with positive thoughts. Why don't we do more of that?" Yeah, it's like it was cooking it in the back, like in the basement in the servants' quarters in an old Georgian mansion, and then it just appears with a roast turkey. And you're like, "Cool."

Rachel: I like that it's coming up on a dumbwaiter, right?

Kara: Yeah, it's gone from being the toddler that had a tantrum earlier in the morning to all of a sudden it's like a butler who's giving you a spread. And you're like, "Oh, you have range, brain. You really have a lot of range. You can really do a lot of different things." So I'm going to start off today and we are going to see how this goes.

So here's my self-coaching I had to do. This actually happened last night. So first of all, when I asked my husband if there's anything he didn't want me to talk about on the podcast, he just said, "I guess not," which I was like, "Cool, that seems not specific and like I will not know until I say something you're upset about, then I'll find out, I guess."

But so we had this interaction last night where we were sitting in the kitchen and I was talking about something that I was worried about or concerned about with one of his kids, my stepkids. Our kids, I'm going to call them here, but they're my stepkids. And so I was sort of like, "Well, I'm worried about this thing, and what if it doesn't get resolved?" And, my brain of course was like, "Let's catastrophize. What if this doesn't get resolved and then the child's entire life is ruined by it?" It is not a life-ruining thing, the thing that I was catastrophizing about.

But so my brain is like spinning out about this and I'm verbally dumping it on Matthew who's actually just had surgery earlier and has not asked for any of this.

Rachel: Earlier that day?

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Kara: Earlier that day. Not surgery is a strong word. An outpatient procedure, but he is coming off of anesthesia.

Rachel: He's in pain and medicated. But okay, all right, continue.

Kara: He is, I would say he had a nice drug trip earlier in the day for medical reasons. Okay. And then he's had a bath and a nap. You know, I waited a few hours. He's fine. He's eaten. He's fine. You're fine. He has the resources available to have this conversation.

And so I'm talking about it and he is in the kitchen. He opens a cabinet, looks in the cabinet, closes the cabinet, and then he's like, "All right, well, I'm going to try to attach that plant to the wall like we talked about. Let me go downstairs and find some fishing twine."

Rachel: So he's being helpful.

Kara: He's being helpful. He's going to do a task. He's going to do a thing. So I actually was calm, but I immediately launched into a very self-righteous explanation about how this was obviously a product of his childhood trauma that he would respond in this way when I was talking about something that bothered me and like the idea that he would not respond. First, actually, I think what happened is he started to go downstairs and then I was like, "Hey, that was frustrating." I just yelled that after him. And then he came back and then I explained why that was frustrating. And then I had this whole explanation about how this was like obviously a product of whatever, how he was raised, his childhood trauma.

Rachel: Did he attach a lot of plants to the wall as...

Kara: He didn't get far enough to do that.

Rachel: No, but I mean, that's part of his...

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Kara: Oh, his childhood trauma was a lot of plant attachment. No, good clarification. It was the non-responsiveness. It was like I said a thing I was worried about and it was like I had never spoken. And he was just like...

Rachel: He's like, "Let's go to the barn and do a project."

Kara: Yeah, he's just like, "I'm not acknowledging that." So then I patronized him by talking about attunement and intimate relationships and he still was sort of like, you know, he's like a golden retriever. So of course he was like, "I'm so sorry," but I could tell he didn't really think it was a problem. So obviously I was not satisfied because he needs to think it's a problem also, right? He needs to understand the error of his ways.

So then I tried doubling down and I flipped it around and I was like, and I never learn. I do this all the time and it never works where I'm like, "Well, wouldn't you be upset if I did X, Y, Z?" And then of course he's like, "No, that wouldn't upset me. That's why I think it's fine to do," right? And I was like, "Wouldn't it upset you if you said something like you're worried about something about the kids and I just was like, well, I'm going to eat a Triscuit and go record a podcast?"

And he was like, "No." And then of course, I was like, that was like my first opportunity to coach myself. And then I was like, "No, I'm not going to coach myself." Instead, I'm going to double down and then explain how him not being upset about that is actually a symptom of everything that's wrong. Right? Like that is actually like even more proof that there's this big problem, right? And I'm like, "And we need to talk about this in couples therapy" because of course I'm like, I'm going to be like the enlightened emotional being and the therapist is going to be like, "Good job, Kara," with claps and then, you know, tell Matthew what he has to do.

Rachel: Gold star, A+.

Kara: Yeah, A+ gold star therapy and then he needs to change. And then I was like, "How could you not find that dismissive?" And he was like, "It would just never occur to me that was dismissive." And my brain just short-circuited. Like I just had that, have you experienced that where like somebody says something and your brain is just like, there's a glitch in the matrix.

Rachel: It's like, "does not compute."

Kara: Yeah, does not compute. It's like an engine having to restart or stalling out, right? You're like, "What?" Like I was absolutely sure that it was so objectively bad and wrong. And the idea that somebody would not find that dismissive, I actually had a really hard time getting my brain around, which I think is one of the differences I think between knowing how to coach yourself and not is that if you don't know how to coach yourself, when you hit that moment, you're just like, "Yeah, no, that's wrong." You hit that glitch and that to you is evidence of how right you are. Whereas I think for us like having learned how to coach ourselves, I'll speak for myself, that moment I now know to be like, "Oh, wait, I should look at this." Like that's a sign, right? That this is somewhere to coach myself.

And then he was like, "You know, I always try to respond to everything you say because I know you really don't like it if I don't respond to anything you say, even if I don't think it needs a response." And I was sort of like, "Oh." Like obviously compromising is part of a relationship, but I think he's bending over backwards to always accommodate. Like I'm on one extreme where I'm like, I hiccuped, you need to respond. Like anything I've said, I want a response. And he, apparently, we could just go through whole days speaking at turns randomly to each other and not responding and that would be totally fine.

But it sort of made clear that he's always bending over backwards to try to accommodate my belief about how interactions should be, whereas I

wasn't giving him that same grace. And I think that moment was for me like, oh, anytime I'm so sure I'm right, that's a time I need to coach myself.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, I feel like it's anytime that I start giving my husband Instagram reels to watch.

Kara: Anytime you start assigning homework, you're like, "I've pulled some resources for you to review."

Rachel: There's a playlist. Maybe I'm not articulating it effectively, but this stranger on the internet who I don't know, watch these 17 reels. It's like when I have that kind of intense convincing energy, I don't always catch myself in the moment, but I eventually catch like, oh, this intensity, the convincing, the watch the reels, let me explain this again. I always talk about it with people. Sometimes you can just catch an energy. Like you can catch that you're just like, I'm moving towards him with this intense energy, and that has become a little cue in my brain to be like, "Oh, right. Why is it so important to me that he sees things the way that I see it?" Why is it so important for me to get him into the place where I am and essentially on my side and agree that my interpretation is the right one?

Kara: Yeah, I think that the desire to send an Instagram reel is so recognizable, so familiar. And it's so interesting because we're like, "Oh, I tried to explain something and they didn't agree. So let me get another authority," but the authority is just like somebody who makes TikTok videos.

Rachel: Oh my God, but I've sent him to your podcast before, which you can imagine how effective that is. I was like, "Listen. Kara, I don't know if you know, she is very smart and she did a whole podcast on this, maybe you want to listen to it." And he's like, "Ugh, what?"

Kara: He's like, "I hate that woman. I don't want to listen to her podcast."

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Rachel: It's like Rachel's crony. Like, "Go listen to Kara. She went to Harvard. Shut up."

Kara: Like, "I went to Wellesley, so obviously you're not going to listen to me, but Kara went to Harvard."

Rachel: "You're not going to listen to me, but maybe double Ivy league. Like maybe you will take it from her." But yes, I have 100% been like, "I think you need to listen to her podcast."

Kara: It's so interesting and also, everybody thinks they just want their partner to do what they want. And I am always thinking about how, like I have a partner who will just do whatever I want to his own detriment probably, but that's not enough for my brain. My brain's like, he's apologizing in this scenario as though he is the one who's done something wrong and he's like, "Oh, I really just need..." I try to respond to everything you say, but I just need to... again, post-anesthesia. I just need to respond to everything.

Rachel: Post-anesthesia and I'm going to hang a plant for you, but I'm trying. I'm trying here.

Kara: But I'm like, "That's not enough," right? It's like my brain is like, "No, he has to agree with me," right? And that our response when someone doesn't agree with us when we're so self-righteous is like, "No, I'm going to send you evidence that other people agree with me," right? It's like you have to get on it.

So what I'm trying to sit with now is the simple thought that it is possible, seems very unlikely to me, but it's possible that someone not responding to something you say is not inherently dismissive. It's possible that a person, even not responding is a little bit not a circumstance, but I'm putting it in the circumstance line. I'm okay with it. That someone not responding to what

you say is a circumstance and it is my brain that has assigned that meaning, right?

And I'm assigning that meaning to a man who basically has oriented his entire life around me, like what I want, what I need, prioritizing our relationship and my work and my desires, more than is probably healthy for him. He got up early this morning even though he hates mornings and he was under anesthesia yesterday to make me breakfast and drive me to the recording studio, right? And my brain is still like, "He's dismissing you, he doesn't care what you're saying," which, how is that possibly the most realistic resolution?

So I can choose in the totality of the circumstances to believe that and that if he doesn't respond to something, he's being dismissive, or I can choose to believe that something else is going on. So what if not responding to something is not inherently dismissive and disrespectful? And I feel like one of the things I want to highlight for folks listening is sometimes that's the self-coaching you can do. It's like I'm not all the way to, "This is cool, I don't care if he responds to me when I say things," because I obviously have my own shit I need to unpack.

I'm curious if you experience this, Rachel. Sometimes I'm like, it's like the tiniest glimmer of possibility. The thought is like a boulder and I'm just walking around it kind of being like, "Maybe it's possible that..." I have to approach it like a horse that's going to bolt. Like I have to circle around it a little bit.

Rachel: I think that's when we're so sure in what we think. And one of my, I think this is one of my crazy thoughts, that I'm often like, "Ugh, God, I just wish he was more like me," right? But then I'm also at the same time...

Kara: Can you imagine dealing with two of us?

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Rachel: I know because I'm texting you all the time being like, "Oh God, here's the new crazy thing." I'm like, "I don't want someone that's more like me." But, to even just have that kind of moment of like, "Oh, maybe that thought doesn't make sense."

Kara: I coach women so much on this. This is one area where I feel like I know that I don't wish that. I still have that thought sometimes. But imagine if you had somebody else who wanted a different family click-up schedule. Like that would be a nightmare for you. You have your own whole system. Imagine if you had a husband who had his own whole system.

Rachel: Or really cared about how the house was decorated for Halloween.

Kara: Oh my God, right. I just had this morning. We were driving, oh my God, this is a tangent, but he was driving me to the studio and we were talking about the house, the renovation of our house upstate. This has been like a nine-month process as you and everyone who listens to the podcast well knows. I've had to coach myself on it. It's cost like three times as much as it was supposed to. It's taken three times as long as it was supposed to. It has just been such a saga. And he was like, "The thing I'm most excited about for the renovation is when it's over, I'm going to clean out one of the sheds and I'm going to hang a pegboard in it and then I'm going to be able to hang all my tools on the pegboard."

And I just had this moment of being like, "What? Are you kidding?" But then it would be so much worse if he had very strong opinions about how the house was decorated and I had to go with those instead of mine. That would be so much worse.

Rachel: You probably didn't need to go three times over the budget for a pegboard though.

Kara: No, if Matthew had renovated the house, we could have done it for 40 dollars and possibly the floors would not be level, but the tools would all

be hanging. But that is such an important thing because so much conflict in relationships comes from right, wanting the other person to respond. And I think there are places in our relationship where I'm really good at being like, this is the couples therapy thing, right? Sort of like, it's not about one is right, one is wrong, it's just two different ways of functioning and how are you going to bridge them?

But even I get caught up in things like this where I'm like, "No, there's acceptable differences we have to bridge and then there's this is dysfunctional and you need to fix it and it's very sad and upsetting that you're so broken that you would think this way," right? That's not what I'm saying, but that's what's happening in my brain.

And then the next step in the self-coaching for me is like, "Okay, I'm circling this boulder that maybe it's possible that someone not responding doesn't mean that they are dismissive." If I really want to coach myself, it's like I need to get curious about why is that so important to me? In the context of our relationship, I wouldn't be in a relationship where a person never responded to me and then just coached myself about why that bothered me. But in the context of a relationship where a person is generally responsive and attuned to me, why am I having such a strong reaction to an occasional non-responsiveness even on something important, right? Is it my own neurodivergence, my own control stuff, my own childhood stuff, right? Is it not feeling heard or seen? Like that's my side of the street that I have to clean up.

And here's the thing that I love about brains. They're just like prosecutors with losing cases. Like the minute that I started thinking that way, my brain was like, "Okay, it's not dismissive, but it's avoidant and that's just as bad." It was like, here comes in the cavalry. And I think that one thing we know about the brain that I think is so helpful in self-coaching is if your brain's decided that you're right and someone else is wrong, and you disprove one

reason why, your brain is not ready to give up the ghost. It just is going to come in with a different theory of the case.

But I think when you know that, you can spot that better. So you're a little bit less likely to be like, "Oh, wow, good point, brain. I hadn't even thought of that. That is also avoidant," right? So I'm able to not take that as seriously when it comes in. And even if that were true, is it in line with my values to be mad at my partner if something feels difficult for them and so they have the normal human instinct to avoid it? That would not be in line with my values, but I just think it's so fascinating to watch your brain be like, "Nope, I have decided this is my territory I have staked out and I am going to defend it no matter what."

Rachel: I think also just taking that out to what are we thinking would happen if our partner agreed with us all the time? There is this kind of magical thinking that I watch myself have of, "Oh, but then we wouldn't be having this disagreement." And it's like, but in what world, even in the healthiest relationship, in what world is it that we're never having any disagreements?

Kara: That's such a good point because right, if I play this through and instead of... I'm sitting here catastrophizing about a thing way in the future that he can neither confirm nor deny nor do anything about. So the best-case scenario is that he hears it and he's like, "Yeah, I don't know. That's something I worry about too." Now, there is value in that connection or whatever, but that is such a good point of like, right, I want him to communicate exactly like me, but what is the...

Rachel: To what end?

Kara: It's not like he has some solution to this problem he's not communicating with me. So we will still be talking about this in couples therapy, but I am moving with my self-coaching from, "Hi therapist, I'd like to talk about how he's objectively wrong and stunted and I am a peerless

model of human emotional enlightenment," to, "It's possible we have different ideas around communication and neither of us is objectively right or wrong," which is a much better place to start from.

So what is your positive Thanks, Brain for today?

Rachel: Right. So last week my husband was away for six days, which that is a long time. And the very first day, my four-year-old comes home from school and he has a fever.

Kara: Also, your children are, I feel like your children are like Dickensian orphans. They are always sick. Somebody is always sick.

Rachel: They're always sick. It's like they came home from the workhouse and they're always ill.

Kara: Did I not tell you we have them in a workhouse? Is that maybe part of the...

Rachel: I think that's why. I don't, I just feel like there's a lot of germs in the house.

Kara: Yeah, it's a workhouse.

Rachel: So my four-year-old comes home and he has a fever and it's just, he immediately goes to the couch. He doesn't want to eat dinner. I'm trying to get dinner on the table. I literally remember standing in front of the kitchen sink thinking, "I don't have time for this. I do not have time for this." And here is my Thanks, Brain moment. It kind of came in two parts, but the first was just out of nowhere, my brain was like, "You like to say that a lot." And I was like, "I do." There was just this recognition that is a thought that I think all the time. And whenever something that I have planned or something unexpected happens, I often just go right to, "I don't have time for this."

And so I just let that be a little marker. I didn't do anything with it. I was just like, "Oh yeah, I guess I do kind of think that a lot," because I had to get dinner on the table and then I had to get the kids to bed and then I was figuring out, "How's this going to affect..." You know, if my four-year-old stays home, how does this affect my work schedule? And I finally got them down, I got them to bed. So I had a little bit of just peace and quiet and it's me and Violet, my dog, and I was sitting on the couch again thinking about everything I needed to do the next day. And I had again, "I don't have time for this." And then my brain was just like, "Time is not what you need."

And this is such a perfect, I was not searching for that thought. I was not trying to feel better. It just like handed me, "Time is not what you need." And in that moment, I was like, "Oh, right." Because I'm just catastrophizing right now. I'm thinking how the week is now going to be a shitshow and I'm not going to be able to get anything done. And when you're catastrophizing, it's not time that you need.

Kara: Right. You could just catastrophize with all the rest of the time. If you have more time to just think those thoughts, you can just...

Rachel: Yeah, time is actually not going to help my dysregulated nervous system in that moment. And that's such a perfect example that in the past I would have tried to be like, "Oh, but it's not that bad and think about how good you have it." I really would have tried early on when I was, you know, first learning this work to find the better positive thought. And instead, it's sometimes you really can just note that, "Oh, this is a thought I think a lot," and that was really helpful for me in the moment, just to notice that it was a pattern. And then my brain just handed that, you know, it's like the dumbwaiter came up from the depths of my brain.

Kara: That's such a perfect example because I feel like your brain was actually breaking down what we try to teach people, which is you have to have compassionate or at least neutral awareness and observation before

you can move to a new thought. It's like people want to rush to the new thought, but that's actually what we're trying to teach people is, "Well, no, first you just have to notice it." Because what you're describing is not that your brain said, "Oh, you have that thought a lot." And then you were like, "Oh my God, I do and I'm such a terrible person and I shouldn't have that thought and I'm a coach and I should know better." And I, you didn't pile on all this shame and stigma on it, right? And it's like that noticing is what allowed the chefs down in the basement in our metaphor to be like, "Oh, let me make a mince pie now," right? It's just like they could notice and come up with something else. It's such a good example.

Rachel: Yeah. And I really, what, we're like 10 years in as coaches, I really do find those moments to still kind of blow my mind. Like when I'm not even searching for it and my brain is just like, "Here you go." And part of it is because we have practiced the tools so much, but I just, I love it. And again, it didn't mean that in that moment I didn't have any more stress or overwhelm. It was just, my brain was so sure that time was what I needed and it just sent me in a different direction. It was like, "Actually, what you need right now is when you feel so stressed and overwhelmed, the things that you need to do to help you in that moment and that's what you actually need." And also, it's not ensuring that nothing unexpected happens in your life, which, you know, my brain often argues that, that is the way it should be.

Kara: That is what's going to happen.

Rachel: That is happiness, that we make a plan and everything goes according to plan.

Kara: Oh my God, can you imagine how boring your life would be if nothing unexpected happened in your life?

Rachel: I know, but how often am I so committed to arguing that I would feel better if only the kids weren't getting sick?

Kara: Totally.

Rachel: But maybe I'll take them out of the workhouse, huh? Maybe that's the...

Kara: I do feel like maybe if they went to school instead. Well, I'm thankful for your brain.

Rachel: And I'm thankful for yours.

Kara: Well, talk to you guys next time.